

recently visited Belfast to begin conversations about this with community leaders, politicians, former paramilitaries, and the police. While some expressed scepticism, a much larger number were eager to begin the conversation. Some were conjecturing, hoping that their interface community might be confident by April. After all, many unexpected and welcome things have happened this year in Northern Ireland. It would be naive to underestimate concerns about the dismantling of that which has provided physical and psychological protection for many years. And walls coming down won't alone solve Northern Ireland's many problems—disaffected youth, a growing suicide rate, a parochial outlook, high levels of economic inactivity, and an economy overly reliant on the state.

It is also disheartening to see new walls going up in some neighbourhoods at the very time the virtual walls between Ireland and Northern Ireland are coming down. Progress at the political level is slowed by a lack of confidence on the street. The loyalist community, in particular, is still reeling from political developments it didn't see coming. What is now most necessary for Northern Ireland is economic development. Foreign investment and increasing tourism can play a part in that. While the political developments that have occurred this year are truly incredible, they only briefly and barely registered on the world's consciousness.

It is likely that there is only a small window of opportunity with the business community in the U.S. Disproportionate attention has been paid to Northern Ireland for more than a decade and there is a sense that it's sorted. Attention will wane.

In 1998, when I was Senator Ted Kennedy's foreign policy adviser, I contacted a Massachusetts company with a call centre in Northern Ireland, thinking the company might like a photo opportunity with Senator Kennedy when he visited Northern Ireland.

That was the last thing they wanted. Many of their clients didn't know where the call centre was located.

They feared they would associate Northern Ireland with disruption and that wouldn't be good for business. Northern Ireland must dispel any remaining doubts that it is bad for business. Nothing will say that like walls coming down.

It is no coincidence that the walls are in the most economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Belfast and it is these neighbourhoods that have so much to gain by their removal.

It is worth considering how much the walls prevent problems and how much they are an invitation to confrontation.

A fundamental shift in thinking about neighbours previously not known, feared and hated is required. It won't happen overnight. But there are some hopeful signs. There are excellent cross-community projects at several interfaces.

The parades season went off peacefully. And those inciting violence at interfaces are no longer paramilitaries but alcohol-fuelled teenagers.

While such anti-social behaviour by teenagers can be found in most American cities, the danger in Belfast is the potential those otherwise minor incidents have to turn into riots.

Many in interface neighbourhoods feel powerless, left behind, and they know that the walls are holding them back, economically as well as psychologically. But the removal of walls is something they do have control over.

This will be for people there to decide. We are simply providing a date on the horizon with the hope that it might spur conversation and consideration. In order to most ac-

curately assess what the people at interfaces think, we will soon commission a survey of people living at interfaces.

When will peace truly come to Northern Ireland? When walls fall. There is nothing more evocative of Northern Ireland's divided past, and nothing more indicative of a shared future than their removal.

Trina Vargo is the president of the U.S.-Ireland Alliance.

#### CELEBRATING THE 108TH BIRTHDAY OF THE VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS OF THE UNITED STATES

Mr. SUNUNU. Mr. President, I rise today to recognize an extraordinary organization with a membership consisting of the best and the bravest America has to offer. On Saturday, September 29, 2007, we honor the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, more commonly known as the VFW, by celebrating the organization's 108th birthday.

The VFW is defined by a record of service and commitment to our country and our veterans. From initially fighting to protect our freedom overseas, to later ensuring that veterans have the compensation and care they deserve back home, the 2.3 million members in approximately 8,400 Posts worldwide deserve our thanks and recognition.

Since 1899, when a group of 13 Spanish-American War veterans convened to advocate for the benefits then denied to their comrades in arms, the VFW has worked tirelessly to protect the rights of fellow veterans while continuously honoring the service of those who made the ultimate sacrifice to protect our way of life.

One of the many privileges I have in serving New Hampshire is working with representatives of the Granite State's VFW Auxiliary Posts. Never losing sight of the organization's mission or obligations, the straightforward approach of members serves as a breath of fresh air. They ask direct questions and expect direct answers. New Hampshire's VFW members should be proud of their representation.

Nationally, the VFW is committed to its mission to "honor the dead by helping the living" through veterans' service, community service, and steadfast advocacy of a strong national defense. This dedication can be witnessed through the organization's work to create the Veterans Administration, its efforts to establish numerous memorials in memory of those who have served, and its devotion to improving the educational, health, and other benefits owed to returning veterans. Moreover, the VFW's efforts in the community, annually providing more than 13 million hours of volunteerism and donating \$2.5 million in college scholarships, further endears the organization and its members to all Americans.

At a time of ongoing conflict abroad, the VFW welcomes our returning servicemembers with support, guidance, and camaraderie as they readjust

to life on the home front. Additionally, as they continue to serve the communities around them, VFW members act as role models whose experiences and commitment to service provide a beacon of light in today's society. For their longstanding and continued contributions, the VFW and its members deserve our immense respect and sincere gratitude.

#### 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF LITTLE ROCK CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

Mr. DODD. Mr. President, this week marks the 50th anniversary of the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School, a victory for equality in education that was only secured with the help of Federal troops. The images that came out of Little Rock in September 1953 remain indelible; the National Guard literally standing in the way of equal education; a citizens' blockade threatening to break into mob violence at the mere thought of sharing their school with Black students; and the quiet dignity and courage of the Little Rock Nine. Their determination to claim their rights is still a source of inspiration, but the rest of the Little Rock crisis is a source of shame.

So we do two things on this 50th anniversary. First and foremost, we honor the nine young students who integrated Little Rock and who gave eloquent testimony that equality begins with education. We thank them today: Ernest Green, Elizabeth Eckford, Jefferson Thomas, Terrence Roberts, Carlotta Walls LaNier, Minnijean Brown, Gloria Ray Karlmark, Thelma Mothershed, and Melba Pattillo Beals.

But second, we need to forthrightly face the truth this week: 50 years later and 53 years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the work they helped begin is still incomplete. Segregation in law is over, but who can doubt that it persists in fact? National Guard troops may no longer be blocking children from the door to an equal education, but the forces that have taken their place, if less visible, are no less potent.

Whether an American child has good teachers, whether that child has up-to-date textbooks, whether that child goes to school in a safe, modern building—all of these educational essentials depend far too much on where that child happens to live. In fact, America—the country that struck down segregation more than a half-century ago—ranks at the bottom of developed countries in the disparity of schooling it offers to the rich and the poor. Why doesn't that gap shame us just as much as anything that happened in Little Rock?

Mr. President, a textbook published in this millennium should not be a luxury. Modern school buildings and computers and libraries should not be luxuries. Qualified teachers, competent guidance counselors, rigorous curricula, small classes—they should not

be luxuries. Children should not be entitled to them because they happen to live in affluence; they are entitled to them because they live in America.

Let us look to this important anniversary for inspiration to desegregate American education for good and for all—to complete the work begun so bravely by the Little Rock Nine.

#### COURAGE AND BRUTALITY IN BURMA

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, for the past 10 days, people around the world have watched with admiration and increasing trepidation as over 100,000 courageous Burmese citizens, led by thousands of maroon clad Buddhist monks, have demonstrated peacefully in Burma's capital city in support of democracy and human rights. They have been calling for an end to military dictatorship and the release of Burma's rightful, democratically elected leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been either in prison or under house arrest for 11 of the past 18 years.

Today, there are reports that Burmese soldiers had cordoned off the streets, fired tear gas, shot and killed several of the protesters and a Japanese journalist, raided monasteries and arrested opposition party members and hundreds of monks. The vicious response by the Burmese military against masses of peaceful, dignified, unarmed citizens, while not surprising, is intolerable and should be universally condemned.

Earlier this week, President Bush made a forceful statement before the United Nations General Assembly criticizing the repression of Burma's military leaders and announcing tighter sanctions and visa restrictions. The President's announcement is welcome.

U.S. leadership is essential, but it can only go so far. Bringing democracy and human rights to the Burmese people will require far stronger pressure from its neighbors and trading partners such as China, Thailand, Russia, and India. It will require these and other nations to disavow the failed policies of engagement with the Burmese junta.

I have long believed that engagement is most often the best policy, but there comes a time when it has demonstrably failed, and there is no more obvious example of this than Burma. A different approach is long overdue.

Burma's friends and allies must make unequivocally clear what President Bush and others have said, and what the brave citizens of Burma are calling for: Burma will suffer severe economic sanctions unless Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners are released and the generals in charge agree to hand over power.

In his own speech at the United Nations, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon voiced hope that the Burmese junta would "exercise utmost restraint" and engage in a dialogue with "relevant parties" in seeking national reconciliation. Obviously, that has not hap-

pened. Since then, the Secretary General has sent his special envoy to Burma to try to convince the Burmese junta to resolve this crisis peacefully.

It is very disappointing that China, Burma's largest trading partner, has once again put its economic interests, and Burma's corrupt generals, above the fundamental rights of the Burmese people. China, which has more influence over the Burmese junta than any other government, blocked the U.N. Security Council from adopting a resolution condemning the violence.

It is a sad commentary on a country that the rest of the world entrusted to host the next Olympics. While China has urged the generals to exercise restraint, history has shown that in Burma words alone are not enough. We hoped China would act differently this time, but so far we have been mistaken.

Many times in the past, peaceful protests in Burma have been put down with brute force. Countless Burmese citizens have been imprisoned or killed for doing nothing more than speaking out in support of democracy.

The past 10 days of protests have attracted far greater crowds, and because of the Internet the whole world can see their numbers, their bravery, and the strength of their conviction. The people of Burma are an inspiration to people everywhere, and they are asking for our support. Without it they cannot succeed. If all nations stand united behind them now, Burma's long nightmare can finally come to an end.

#### CRITICAL ACCESS HOSPITAL IMPROVEMENTS

Mr. CONRAD. As the chairman knows, many rural hospitals are facing significant financial pressure and are finding it increasingly difficult to operate under the Medicare prospective payment system. In response, the chairman and I have worked closely to support our rural facilities and established the Critical Access Hospital Program in 1997. This program was designed to help small, rural facilities remain financially viable in the face of inadequate Medicare reimbursement, and it has been tremendously beneficial to maintaining access to hospital care across North Dakota and other rural states.

Mr. BAUCUS. I share my colleague's support for the Critical Access Hospital Program. Like North Dakota, Montana struggles to maintain sufficient access to hospital care. The Critical Access Hospital Program has been an important component in ensuring that our hospitals can remain open and continue to serve Medicare beneficiaries.

Mr. CONRAD. Despite the successes that have been achieved under the Critical Access Hospital Program, changes made as part of the Medicare Modernization Act of 2003 have harmed the ability of certain critical hospitals, such as St. Joseph's Hospital in Dickinson, ND, to become critical access

hospitals. It is imperative that flexibility be reinstated in the program to allow States to deem hospitals as necessary providers and, therefore, eligible for critical access hospital status. I have spoken with you about this issue in the past and am pleased that you are willing to consider this issue during consideration of a Medicare package later in the year.

Mr. DORGAN. I strongly support reinstating the ability of States to deem necessary providers to be critical access hospitals. The Critical Access Hospital Program has helped ensure that the doors stay open at many hospitals in rural America. Without this program, many Medicare beneficiaries in my State would have to drive hours to receive health care. I think it is important to give States flexibility to deem necessary providers as critical access hospitals and not rely on a one-size-fits-all definition. If we don't address this issue, I am worried that one of our hospitals in western North Dakota, St. Joseph's Hospital, may not be able to survive. I appreciate Chairman BAUCUS' commitment to work with us to address this issue and to consider modifications to the Critical Access Hospital Program that would allow St. Joseph's Hospital in Dickinson, ND, to participate.

Mr. BAUCUS. I applaud my colleague's efforts on this issue and assure you that I am committed to working with you to enact modifications and improvements to the Critical Access Hospital Program in Medicare legislation later this year that will assist hospitals like St. Joseph's.

Mr. CONRAD. I thank my colleague for his commitment and look forward to working with you to craft a reasonable solution that benefits St. Joseph's.

#### NATIONAL LEARN AND SERVE CHALLENGE

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, this week marks the first-ever nationwide Learn and Serve Challenge, a series of events occurring across the country to raise awareness about the value of service learning and the role of Learn and Serve America in supporting and promoting it.

Service learning is a way for schools, colleges, and communities to combine community service and academic learning in ways that increase student learning, strengthen partnerships between schools and the communities they serve, and perhaps most importantly, tap into young people's endless ideas and enthusiasm for solving problems.

We know that the real benefits of service learning go far beyond the events of a week, or even a year. They last a lifetime, because countless students who participate in service learning continue to serve throughout their lives.

As my brother Robert Kennedy said, each time persons stand up for an